



Michigan National Organization for Women

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March 13, 2007

Michigan NOW Supports HB 4162 and HB 4091 That Would Require School Districts To Have Anti-Harassment Policies

Michigan NOW commends Representative Pam Byrnes, Representative Aldo Vagnozzi and co-sponsors for introducing House Bills 4162 and 4091 that would require school districts and public school academies to adopt policies prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying in school settings. Michigan NOW also commends the House Education Committee for having a hearing on the bills and this important subject.

In 1980, the Michigan Legislature wisely amended the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to define sex discrimination as including sexual harassment in employment, public accommodations or public services, education, or housing. This law was one of the first of its kind in the country. The law has given victims of sexual harassment in education settings a complaint investigation mechanism at the Michigan Department of Civil Rights and a private cause of action in our courts. To avoid liability, employers, owners of public accommodation venues, educators and landlords have had to make efforts to prevent sexual harassment.

Additionally, Title IX of the federal education law requires schools receiving federal financial assistance to prevent and remedy sexual harassment. The U.S. Department of Education issued Sexual Harassment Guidance in 1997 and again in 2001. A *Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment* is available at their Web site. The U.S. Supreme Court has issued several decisions on sex harassment in the schools. Moreover, our own Michigan Department of Education has issued a *Model Anti-Bullying Policy* available on their Website should a school district choose to adopt one. These measures have all been helpful, but have not thoroughly solved the problem of harassment and bullying in the schools.

We expect that requiring schools to have an anti-harassment and anti-bullying policy will help to protect school children from predatory pupils or others who deride or prey upon others based on distinguishing characteristics like race, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

One of our Michigan NOW members, Valerie Wilkes, Ed.D. of Muskegon, can attest to the benefit to be gained by state anti-bullying legislation. She taught sixth grade students in Conroe, Texas, a small town 30 miles north of Houston from 1981 to 2005. "Before the Texas legislature passed anti-bullying legislation, teachers and administrators didn't pay attention. There was an attitude that you had to take care of it by yourself, that a student was whining if they complained about bullying," said Dr. Wilkes. "Even when we called the parents of the child who was bullying, the parent would say it was just a part of growing up. People don't understand if they haven't been bullied themselves. Legislation making bullying illegal changed the attitudes of the teachers, parents and administrators; it changed the atmosphere in the school. Teachers had training on how to recognize bullying and what to do."

Michigan NOW sees a connection between allowing a youngster in a school setting to bully and harass others with impunity and adults committing similar harassing acts in their family, workplaces, and community later in life. Schools by their inaction can teach people inappropriate behavior and conduct. Schools need to be proactive in teaching people to respect one another, regardless of distinguishing characteristics. We expect that a harassment-free school will result in a better education environment for all children, and produce adult citizens with more

NOW's purpose is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.

tolerance for individual differences - and self-control when the urge to victimize others arises. "There was a huge change when bullying became illegal in Texas. People took the harassment seriously and found methods to address the problems. People don't realize the number of students who stay home from school and suffer needlessly because of bullying. I would urge the Michigan legislature to pass an anti-bullying bill" said Dr. Wilkes.

We urge the House Education Committee to pass a comprehensive bill requiring schools to have a strong proactive policy and program to prevent harassment and bullying, to train staff and students on how to recognize harassment and bullying, and to provide complaint mechanisms and remedies.

The National Organization for Women is the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States. NOW has 500,000 contributing members and 550 chapters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

For More Information

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